

# Ancient Epic

Katherine Callen King

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## Ancient Epic

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This edition first published 2009  
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Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

*Registered Office*

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

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9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

King, Katherine Callen.

Ancient epic / Katherine Callen King.

p. cm. – (Blackwell introductions to the classical world)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-5947-0 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Epic poetry—History and criticism. 2. Poetry, Ancient—History and criticism. 3. Heroes in literature. I. Title.

PN1307.K56 2009

809.1'32—dc22

2008036233

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 10.5 on 13pt Galliard by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong  
Printed in Singapore by Fabulous Printers Pte Ltd

To Esther and Wallis Pereira for their unfailing support,  
to the many graduate and undergraduate students from  
whom I have learned so much, and to research assistant  
extraordinaire, Catharine Platt McGraw



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# Chronologies

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[most dates are approximate]

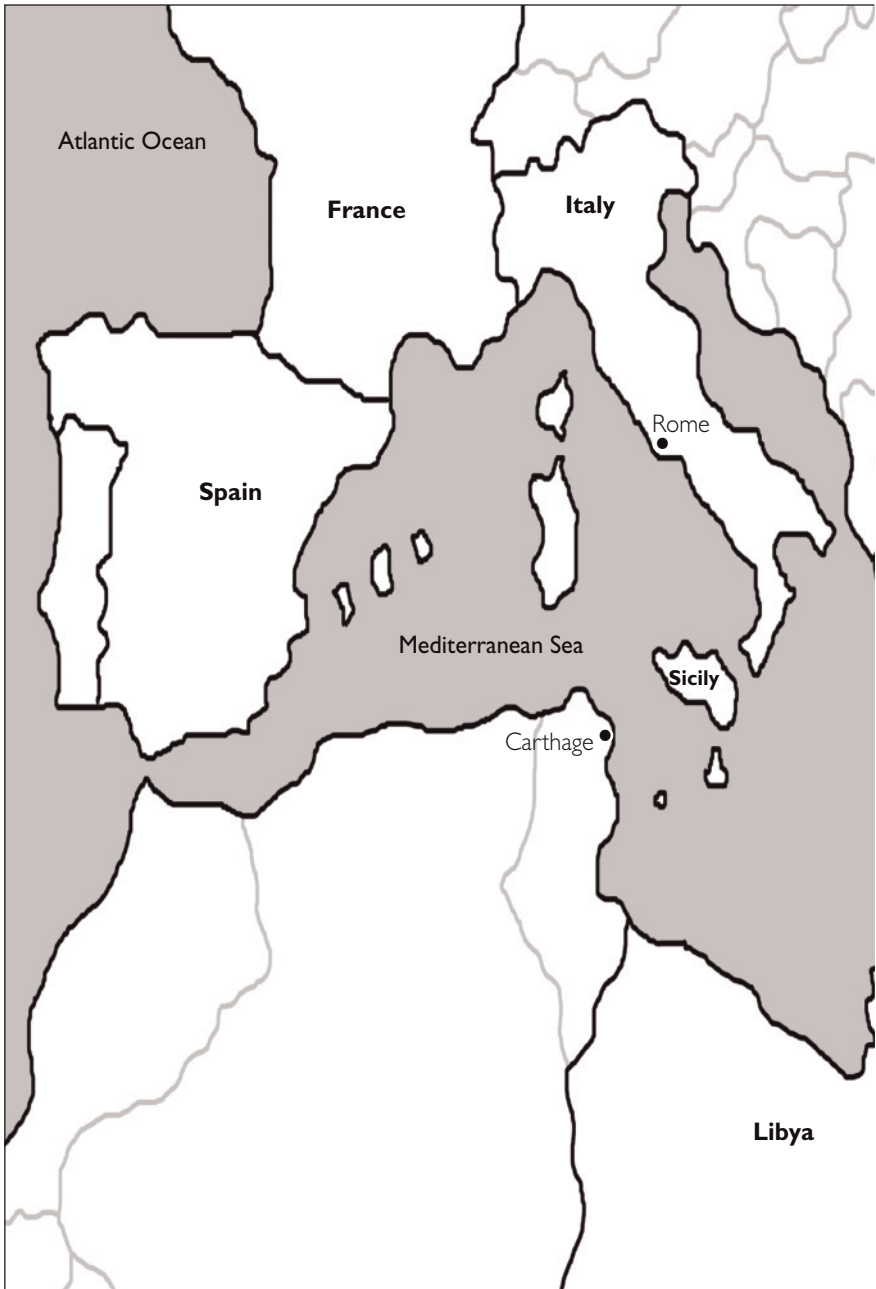
## GILGAMESH

- 2700 BCE Gilgamesh King in Uruk  
2100–2000 Summerian Gilgamesh epics composed in writing  
1800 Earliest tablets of Summerian epics (*Gilgamesh & Agga*;  
*Gilgamesh & Huwawa*; *Gilgamesh & Bull of Heaven*;  
*Death of Gilgamesh or Gilgamesh in the Netherworld*)  
1700s Akkadian epic composed = Old Babylonian Version  
1500–1100 Middle Babylonian Versions (Hurrian and Hittite trans-  
lations)  
1200 Sin-leqe-unninni creates Standard Version  
700 Oldest extant tablets of Standard Version

## GREEK AND ROMAN EPIC

- 1400–1200 Bronze Age Greece  
1184 Traditional date of Trojan War  
750 Writing reintroduced to Greece  
Traditional date for founding of Rome by Romulus  
725–625 *Iliad* and *Odyssey* composed  
600–500 Epic Cycle poems composed  
400 Antimakhos of Kolophon composes the lost *Thebaid* and  
*Lyde*  
335–23 Aristotle writes and lectures at the Lyceum in Athens  
331 Alexander the Great founds Alexandria on the coast of  
Egypt

- 323 Alexander the Great dies
- 305–283 Founding of the Museum and Library at Alexandria under kingship of Ptolemy I (Soter). Alexandria is now the royal capital of Egypt.
- 284–270 Zenodotos, first Director of the Library at Alexandria, categorizes epic and edits the texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*
- 285–? Kallimakhos catalogues the collection and writes poetry at the Library of Alexandria
- 282–246 Reign of Ptolemy II (Philadelphos) at Alexandria
- 270–245 Apollonios of Rhodes composes the *Argonautika* while working as Director of the Library of Alexandria
- 264–241 First Punic War
- 235–204 Naevius composes *Poem of the Punic War* in Saturnian verse
- 218–202 Second Punic War
- 169 Ennius completes the *Annales*, composed in dactylic hexameter
- 149–6 Third Punic War, destruction of Carthage
- 132–121 The Gracchi brothers trouble the Roman Senate and are assassinated
- 107–100 Marius elected Consul six times
- 83–1 Sulla's dictatorship
- 70 Virgil is born
- 63 Octavian (later Caesar Augustus) is born
- 51 Cicero writes "The Dream of Scipio"
- 49 Julius Caesar crosses the Rubicon and marches on Rome
- 44 Julius Caesar elected dictator and assassinated
- 43 Ovid is born
- 38–35 Virgil completes the *Eclogues*
- 31 Octavian defeats Marc Antony and Cleopatra at Actium
- 29 Virgil completes the *Georgics*, begins the *Aeneid*
- 27 Octavian becomes Augustus
- 23 Ovid publishes the *Amores*, the first of many elegiac works
- 19 Virgil dies leaving manuscript of the *Aeneid*
- 8 CE Ovid's *Metamorphoses* published when he is exiled
- 17 CE Ovid dies



Map prepared by Cat Buckles





# Introduction

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Why do students compelled to read ancient epics in college classrooms invariably discover that they have learned something valuable? What could a story composed thousands of years ago have to say to us today?

An active-duty Air Force captain who has served four tours in Iraq explains why he intends to tattoo “the wrath of Achilles” in Greek on his right Achilles tendon:

*I want to mark the anger on my body for a lot of reasons . . . I try to imagine what that Myrmidon [Achilles] must have thought, and his frustration [at] serving for a king who did not want to listen to his best fighters to learn how to fight a war.* (Email dated April 20, 2008, to the author)

Iraq Veteran Michael Zacchea, who has been slowly integrating himself back into peacetime society, says,

*[Odysseus] resolved his issues by killing all the suitors . . . really the message is that I have to make my peace with people who, you know, did not go to Iraq or insulated [themselves] from the reality of Iraq.* (Interview September 28, 2007 with David Brancaccio for PBS news show, *NOW*)

Achilles’ angry idealism and Odysseus’ difficult return from war clearly still speak to modern readers in urgent and personal ways.

Searing scenes invite questions about modern life, as when Aeneas’ effort to live only for an imperialist future leads him to hug his son goodbye encased in full armor (*Aeneid* 12. 432–442). In 1974, John Arthur Hanson, professor of classics and a keen observer of the ideological clash between the generation of the fifties and that of the sixties, saw a parallel between this scene and the “Puritan ethic” backbone of

American capitalism, and he subsequently transformed it into “Mr Brass Bids Farewell to his Son Julius:”

*But after he had buttoned up his heavy Harris tweed overcoat,  
and clutched his briefcase,  
He surrounded his son with his scratchy sleeves  
and made a pass at kissing him – but his hatbrim got in the way.  
“Boy,” he said, “from me you have to learn guts,  
and where hard work gets you.  
Ask some other guy about luck.  
It’s because of my own efforts that you’ve got a roof over your head,  
and you’re going to come into a big pile.  
You just remember that, when you get some real balls on you.  
You don’t need to look outside the family,  
just be like your old man and your uncle Hector.”  
Then he made a break for the carport.*

Other epic protagonists generate similarly intense recognition. Gilgamesh’s struggles against the forces of nature resonate both with those who worry about the environment and anyone who has lost a loved one to death. Who could fail to be awed by Medea’s obsession for Jason or to sympathize with Arachne’s artistic rebellion?

The epic poems in which these memorable protagonists appear – the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*, *Argonautika*, and *Metamorphoses* – remain a fount of inspiration for poets, dramatists, and musicians, partly because they tell good stories in an aesthetically beautiful way, but mostly because they wrestle with issues important to generation after generation of readers. They speak to hearts and minds concerned about human potentiality and limitation, about the consequences of passion (righteous anger, sexual love, intense grief, or desire for honor), and about the competing claims of civilization, the environment, and the need to reconcile self-interest with the common good. Their explorations of armed violence – what it achieves, what it costs, and what it serves – have much to impart to everyone who thinks about what heroism might mean today.

Chief among epic themes that are still of deep concern to modern societies are the basic implications of being human: intelligence gives us a godlike potential to master our environment, but we are limited by the deadly consequences of our not actually being gods. Human passions – anger, grief, pride, love – often interfere with intelligence, and while gods can make mistakes without serious consequences to themselves because

they will always have a tomorrow, human mistakes can end life or make it permanently unbearable. Worst of all, human beings inevitably grow old and die. What meaning, then, attaches to our existence? Is there anything we can do to make ourselves outlive our ephemeral bodies? The latter is the question most consistently pondered by epic poems.

Another fact of life recognized by all six epic poets is that most people want power but almost all who get it abuse it. Long before Lord Acton talked about absolute power corrupting absolutely, Babylonian, Greek, and Roman poets explored the catastrophic effects of a powerful person's refusal to acknowledge the claims of others, depicting it as stemming from a failure to acknowledge limits. This is what the Greeks called *hubris*, an extreme type of arrogance. In the epics, abuses of power range from general exploitation of a populace to violence against individuals and even the gods. In the case of violated gods, sometimes their retaliation is limited to the offender; often, however, they send wars, plagues, famines, and other disasters to coerce recompense and teach lessons. How a hero reacts to his own or to another's power is an important, if not central, interest in all six epics. All are concerned with ways to control the arrogance of power, but some focus more on internal restraints, that is, moral codes and self-control, and others on external ones like social codes and counteractive physical force.

Both the efficacy and effect of violence are concerns for many poets. Physical force is used sometimes to counter abuses of power, sometimes to support or commit them. Often it has unintended consequences. Although all epic heroes must be capable of committing great bodily injury to enemies, none of these six epics celebrates violence. Instead, they are careful to balance their heroes' violence with the more cooperative virtues of compassion and intelligence, and they invite their audiences to view many of their heroes' violent deeds with ambiguity even when they are committed in the service of "good" causes.

What exactly is an epic? "Epic" comes from the Greek *epos*, which means "word," and, by extension, a "story told in words." Only certain kinds of stories told in certain kinds of words, however, qualified as epic for the ancient Greeks and Romans. First and foremost, epic stories had to be told in verse, not prose, and they had to be told in a specific kind of verse: the six-beat hexameter line that was considered to be the most stately and dignified of all classical meters. Less discriminating Greeks apparently considered all works written in this meter (scientific treatises, genealogies, martial exhortations, hymns to a god, stories about the gods interacting with each other) to be epics, but Aristotle, fourth-century BCE

Athenian scientist and literary critic, is more exacting: epic poetry must tell a long but focused story with the same kinds of reversals, disasters, and recognitions that we find in tragedy; its language must be highly adorned with metaphors and exotic words; and the poet must not speak in his own voice, but must keep himself in the background (*Poetics* 1447b, 1459–1460). Lastly, the subject of epic must be the deeds of heroes, a criterion so important that Aristotle uses the word “heroic” interchangeably with “hexameter” to designate the meter proper to the genre.

Heroes were a special class of men, superior beings whose deeds earned them a status between a human and god. Most of them had a divine parent or grandparent, and they could do things that no modern man could do. The age in which they lived and fought and died was named the Age of Heroes, a legendary period that preceded the modern age of ordinary people by hundreds of years. Some of them, like Herakles, performed deeds in individual story cycles, but most participated in at least one of the three major story cycles that became cultural touchstones throughout Greece: the Voyage of the Argonauts, the Theban Troubles, and the Trojan War. In archaic and classical Greece, the spirits of long-dead heroes were regularly invoked by priests who hoped they would protect the localities in which they were buried, and their stories were continually evoked by poets and rhetoricians who made them speak anew to modern cultures. In other words, ancient heroes continued to affect religious, political, and cultural life long after their magnificent muscles were thought to have ceased wielding swords and spears.

Since the Babylonian, Greek, and Roman communities were male dominated, epic action revolves around male heroes. Orbiting around the heroes are women and deities, enabling, hindering, motivating. There is a clear differentiation between male and female roles and a tendency to associate the male with cultural progress and the female with repetitious natural cycles. The female is usually more concerned with preserving or perpetuating biological life, the male with preserving his name or enhancing social position. Both sexes can be equally concerned with revenge. Only in the later epics is emotionality per se labeled a female characteristic; in *Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey*, men as well as women love, weep in grief, and suffer moments of despair. The poets of *Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad* are even willing to depict their heroes in an agony of fear, clearly not feeling that this detracts from their heroism. In the *Aeneid*, on the other hand, fear and open lamentation are closely associated with females, as are all strong passions except love of father and country. Achilles' desire for heroic revenge, which is honorable in

the *Iliad*, in the *Aeneid* is portrayed as primitive and as the province of the goddess Juno.

Larger-than-life representatives from the Age of Heroes, who illuminate human action through their closeness to the divine, help to create the seriousness that characterizes epic genre. Heaps of dead enemies and conquered monsters are not an end in themselves; only when a hero's action engages the whole poetic universe, the gods as well as his human community, can it rise to epic status. Presenting it in verse and enriching it with metaphorical language may be important, but they are not enough: epic action must profoundly affect or illustrate important community values.

Some of these values are political. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for example, explores kingly responsibility via its hero's monster slaying, city building, and quest for knowledge. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* use Achilles' prowess and Odysseus' multifaceted intellect to explore what kind of man deserves to be at the top of a given political system, who deserves to be the Greek army's commander in chief or the king of Ithaca. The *Aeneid* uses Aeneas' piety to examine not only what kind of man, but also what nation deserves to rule.

Closely related to these political aspects of epic are social and theological, or cultural, ones. Gilgamesh probes the human condition in a universe of both irascible and beneficent gods who must all be respected despite their being sometimes at odds. Achilles' choices restore the community's heroic ethic while validating a tragic vision of life in which the gods' favor ensures glorious death. Odysseus' success, on the other hand, confirms the idea of hereditary kingship called into question by the *Iliad*, while it validates a "comic" vision of life in which the gods' favor secures prosperous survival. The hero's desire for self-fulfillment is paramount in all three. Aeneas' achievement, on the other hand, promotes a hierarchical ranking of nations at the same time as it elevates self-sacrifice to supreme worth: in the *Aeneid*, Jupiter's favor ensures national survival, and validates – or seems to validate – a superior national character.

The poets of both the *Argonautika* and the *Metamorphoses* challenge epic norms by marginalizing the heroes and the heroism of their predecessors and by calling attention to the artifice of their creations. Nonetheless, both offer value systems that could be described as important to their communities. The *Argonautika* promotes communal cooperation rather than individual heroics, while the *Metamorphoses*, more negatively, encourages wariness against clinging to or heroizing any story, identity, or power.

## Overview of the Six Epics

Just as modern poets are inspired by Greek and Roman epic, Greek poets were inspired by the ancient poetry of western Asia, the area that today includes Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine. The epic poetry that came from southern Mesopotamian civilizations (first Sumer, later Babylonia) was especially influential. After many years of neglect, mainstream English speakers are now beginning to recognize the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* as a masterpiece and its hero, grief-stricken Gilgamesh, as a forerunner of Homer's Achilles.

Composed in three stages (roughly 2100, 1700, and 1200 BCE), this magnificent poem originated in ancient Sumer as five short epics that focused on King Gilgamesh's extraordinary feats against warriors, monsters, and the obliterating forces of nature. All his deeds were performed in the context of defending and improving his city. These five Sumerian poems evolved first into a long Old Babylonian epic concerned with Gilgamesh's struggle against human mortality. A final poet created the still longer Babylonian Standard Version, which focuses firmly on the value of cultural immortality as counterweight to biological death. In this final version, Gilgamesh lives on for future generations both in the walled city he built and in the adventures he experienced and "recorded." The *Epic of Gilgamesh* celebrates the hero's extraordinary learning as much as it does his conquering of monsters, his story as much as his city.

The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were most likely composed on the west coast of Asia Minor around 700 BCE. Their poet(s), whom we, like the Greeks, will call Homer, emphasized the idea of cultural immortality in epic song as much as did the poet of *Gilgamesh*. In the *Iliad*, however, the emphasis is on its potential to compensate for heroic death in battle. City-building, which plays a central role in *Gilgamesh*, does not become supremely important again until Virgil's *Aeneid*, for the heroes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* pride themselves rather on being city-sackers. However, if we define "city" more loosely to include community and its shared values of governance, as opposed to the lawlessness found in nature, we find that "city" values do play a role in the Homeric epics, especially the *Odyssey*, where the hero's goal includes not only reuniting with his wife and son, but also reestablishing the proper political functioning of his kingdom. The *Iliad's* tragic vision is very much concerned with community, in this case a community of warriors, but more in the sense of showing how vulnerable a human community is when its leader forces

its greatest hero to choose between his responsibility to members of the community and his responsibility to its broken ideals, that is, between the ethical self and the unethical community.

The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* became the touchstone for all classical literature created in Athens, Alexandria, and Rome, and they are essential for understanding all other classical genres as well as subsequent manifestations of epic poetry. These two universally known monumental poems shaped Greek and Roman concepts of narrative structure, tragedy, comedy, war, marriage, relationships between human and divine beings, and achieving immortality through fame. Aristotle modeled his definition of epic on the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and all epic poets and readers seem to have regarded the Homeric poems as the standard of epic excellence. Hellenistic and Roman authors could work either with or against the Homeric poems; they could not ignore them.

Apollonios' *Argonautika*, written in Greek Alexandria around 260 BCE, is interesting both for how it brilliantly reworks Homer and for its extensive influence on Virgil's *Aeneid*. This Hellenistic poet celebrates a different kind of literary heroism, one that is collective rather than singular, and one that seems unconcerned with mortality. The Argonauts want fame, but not in the context of compensation for death. Although much of the epic seems like a pure adventure story, a kind of epic seriousness is achieved by the foundational rituals with which the Argonauts transform the landscape and bring a touch of civilization to the "barbarian," that is, non-Greek, world. Apollonios also interjects into epic a new passion imported from Greek tragedy, obsessive erotic love, and along with it a tragic heroine, Medea, who is more memorable than most of the male heroes.

Virgil's *Aeneid* incorporates and reworks not only Homeric epic and Apollonios' inventions, but the best of Greek and Roman lyric, narrative, and philosophic poetry. The *Aeneid* deploys a singular heroic protagonist like those of the Homeric poems, but subordinates the Homeric ego to a collective purpose. Perhaps because its author had witnessed both civil war and the ascendancy of an emperor, the *Aeneid* insists that the truly epic struggle is not for the happiness or immortality of a singular self, but for the perhaps unachievable ideal of dispassionate leadership. The result is an overtly nationalist but profoundly ethical masterpiece whose vast influence on subsequent art and literature makes it, like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, essential reading for any student of western culture.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* differs in many essential ways from the above five epics, not least in that it has no protagonist. No questing, angry, or

foundational king focuses its verses. The “hero” of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is “shapes changing” in an apparently endless progression from the origin of the world to his present-day Rome. Ovid’s poem plays with his predecessors’ ideas of heroism, identity, and immortality while challenging epic norms of unity, heroic singularity, and martial prowess. Because of these challenges, and because of its apparent lack of seriousness, some scholars refuse it the name of epic. Nonetheless, the *Metamorphoses* is often studied together with Homeric and Virgilian epic, largely because Ovid chose to make it epic in form and also because there is no better way of appreciating this tragicomic masterpiece.

### Divine Contexts

Since epic ponders universal questions only within specific cultural settings, it is important to become acquainted with the major gods and goddesses whose myths shaped the poets’ religious and cultural worlds. The gods in Mesopotamia and those around the Aegean Sea lived in similar hierarchies and share many features, but their relationship to each other and to their human worshipers was significantly different. What follows is a brief account of the Greek and Babylonian Divine Succession Myths, which names all the gods important to the epics, and a summary of their major differences. At the end of the book there is appended a list of major gods that may be used for reference as you read about the epics themselves. Although I focus on “national” to the exclusion of local gods, it is important to know that every river was a god and that every beautiful woodland, meadow, or cove was alive not just with trees and plants, but with numerous protective nymphs and fauns.

### The Mesopotamian Divine Succession Myth

Sumerian myth tells of a struggle among primal Mesopotamian gods, but the issue is status or class rather than absolute rule. One group of gods, the **Anunna**, forced another group of gods, the **Igiggi**, to do all the work of growing and cooking food and building and maintaining palaces to dwell in. When the Igiggi gods rebelled, a war did not ensue. Instead, the Anunna gods created human beings to do the work for all the gods, who can now live in relative harmony.<sup>1</sup>